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Espionage — Coverage Poses Risks

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When the story broke so promisingly earlier this year, the New York Times called the mysterious KGB master spy "the most valuable defector from the Soviet Bloc . . . in recent years."

It was the first spy tale of 1986: A major general in the Soviet KGB had defected to the West. The CIA was keeping his existence a secret, but he was more valuable than Vitaly S. Yurchenko, the turnabout defector who had been lost back to Moscow.

Then, within 72 hours, the story of the secret defector became, as United Press International put it, "the mystery of the spy who may never have been."

Seen as Trespassers

And now it seems this tale may be best remembered as a parable to the press about the risks of reporting on the secret world of intelligence.

In this darkest part of the governmental forest, the values of free press and an open society are often regarded as unwanted, even dangerous trespassers. The chance the press will err or be manipulated by its sources is greater than anywhere else, and some say the consequences of mistakes are potentially more harmful.

By publishing at all, the press can abort an American clandestine operation—as the Washington Post is said to have done in November—or even cause the death of an American agent.

"It is terrible to say it, but one who does stories about the intelligence community has to lower his expectations of accuracy," said former New York Times reporter Seymour M. Hersh.

'Fifth Man' Is Here

The story of the KGB major general's alleged defection began Jan. 25, when U.S. News & World Report published a report entitled "Defectors: The 'Fifth Man' Is Here."

"In addition to the four spies that the government acknowledges fled to the West," the magazine wrote, "a KGB major general—the highest-ranking defector of them all—was brought to the U.S. last year, well-informed sources told U.S. News & World Report."

He supposedly fled by helicopter from West Germany last spring, was hidden to prevent press leaks before the Geneva summit meeting, and then later settled in the Midwest under a new identity, the magazine reported.

What transpired in reaction to that item is a primer in competitive Washington journalism, particularly when it touches the furtive world of intelligence.

First, when competing news media received advance copies of the magazine, they tried to get independent confirmation and break the story before U.S. News & World Report reached the stands on Monday.

New York Times reporter Philip Shenon spent the preceding Saturday combing Capitol Hill. On its front page Sunday, Jan. 26, the paper quoted what it said were at least two unnamed congressional sources saying the high-ranking KGB officer was providing information that "'is much more important' than any provided" by Yurchenko or other recent defectors.

The story received prominent exposure nationwide via the New York Times news service; it was, for instance, the lead story in that day's Orange County Register.

Other wire services also moved stories, citing U.S. News & World Report and the New York Times as sources.

As usual, competing media prepared "reaction stories" for Monday. Notable was an Associated Press story that said the intelligence committees on Capitol Hill "had been told nothing" about any such defector.

In its third paragraph, however, the AP story offered what seemed additional confirmation:

"However, House Intelligence Committee Chairman Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.) said he had received a 'preliminary report' on the alleged Soviet defector. He declined to comment further until he received a more thorough briefing on the case and said he was 'not yet sure about the information.'"

Hamilton's press secretary, Nick Cullather, now says his boss did not intend to confirm the defector story, and the AP says it did not mean to imply Hamilton was doing so.

'Tantalizing' Remarks

But nonetheless, said AP Washington Bureau chief Chuck Lewis, Hamilton's remarks were "a tantalizing equivocation."

As official Washington resumed work that Monday, the story had entered the city's information bloodstream. Reporters tried the usual sources for comment—the White House, Capitol Hill officials charged with overseeing intelligence agencies, the State Department and the CIA itself.

At the daily White House briefing for reporters, presidential spokesman Larry Speakes issued what the Washington Post called "an unusually flat denial."

"That story is not correct," Speakes said. Which part? "The whole thing."

Off the record, the denials were even stronger.

The CIA, as usual, refused to comment publicly. But off the record, reporters say, the agency denied the story in unusually direct terms.

"As that Monday went on, we were getting total negatives on it," said one reporter who asked for anonymity. "We couldn't find a single source who would confirm in any way."

Tuesday morning, however, the Washington Times quoted Sen. Chic Hecht (R-Nev.) as confirming the story—the first so-called "on-the-record confirmation."

"Where there's smoke there's fire, and I'm sorry about the leak," Hecht, a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, was quoted as saying somewhat cryptically. The senator, the paper said, "would not provide details."

Reporters went scurrying again, and at a briefing, National Security Adviser John M. Poindexter tried to restate the Administration's denial.

When reporters—who scrutinize all official denials in Washington for possible loopholes—thought Poindexter's denial ambiguous, the White House issued a more cate-

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gorical statement on the record: ". . . . there is no defector either here or in any other country."

Does the "fifth man" exist? If not, how could the story have found its way into print?

The lone on-the-record confirmation is that of Hecht, a junior senator from Nevada. "The senator has sources of his own," said Mike Miller, his press secretary. "He is a former counterintelligence agent himself." Hecht worked for Army counterintelligence in Germany between 1952 and 1954, his office said.

But others are convinced the story is false. "I don't know of a single source in the intelligence community that encouraged any part of that story," said David Holliday, spokesman for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

The New York Times continues to stand by its story, despite the denials. "It is my feeling that this White House would, if it felt that there were a legitimate national security issue, issue misleading statements," said deputy Washington editor Howell Raines, who was in charge of the paper's Washington Bureau at the time.

Officially, U.S. News & World Report also stands by the story. "We have gotten even more confirmation that we were right, and we have nothing at all to sway us from what we originally did," said James Kilpatrick, U.S. News' senior editor for administration.

Privately, however, the story caused in-house controversy at the magazine. Three weeks before it published the story, for instance, the magazine had a version of it edited and ready for the presses.

At 11:30 that night, shortly before press time, then-editor Shelby Coffey III decided "the story needed additional reporting," ordered it held and that version of it killed. "Obviously, with a story of that sensitivity, you want to be very careful," Coffey said.

Some of the magazine's reporters harbored doubts all along. "I'd feel a lot better about it if we had a name for the defector," said one senior editor privately.

U.S. News & World Report spent nearly two months trying to ferret out the story, receiving firm denials from such sources as congressional intelligence committees and, off the record, from the CIA.

Identified as General

After holding the story, its reporters went out again, "this time identifying the defector as a KGB general," said Holliday of the Senate committee. "The reporter told us they were not looking for confirmation anymore, just letting us know they were going with the story. Then she said they wanted to know if we would be a second source of confirmation."

This delicate process, in which reporters must ask sources questions in ways that barely seem like questions, is endemic to reporting on intelligence matters.

"Reporters will come to me and say things like, 'If you won't comment, then tell me if I'm heading in the right direction—am I getting warm, am I getting cold?'" said a senior Capitol Hill staff aide who works in intelligence.

The reason reporters must tread lightly, even play childhood games of hot and cold, is that no one in intelligence wants to be known as a press source.

"We are an intelligence organization, and the only reason our methods work is that they are not publicly known or acknowledged," said Kathy Pherson, chief of media relations for the CIA. "For that reason we can neither confirm nor deny most things about what we do."

So reporters are left to take a shred from one source, put it together with a possibly unrelated comment and try to weave it with a third.

"You are totally at the mercy of people who know everything and you know nothing," said former New York Times reporter Hersh.

Now add to that something that goes beyond secrecy.

Deliberate Leaks

In intelligence, where secrecy is considered a matter of national security, sources sometimes consider it patriotic to lie, said author David Wise, a frequent writer on intelligence matters.

"Half truths and untruths . . . are known as 'cover stories,'" Wise said. "Covert operations are set up in ways that they have 'plausible deniability.' These are terms of art in intelligence."

To make matters more complex, most story tips are deliberate leaks by one side or another, attempts to use the press to manipulate policy—perhaps West vs. East, Capitol Hill vs. the White House, or even FBI vs. CIA.

"You have to ask yourself who is providing the story and why," said Joseph Fromm, a retired U.S. News & World Report editor who first brought the "fifth man" tip to the magazine. Fromm refused to discuss the resulting story.

A leak could also be "disinformation," a lie officially given the press to deceive both the Soviet Union and the American public. To this day, for instance, New York Times Washington editor Bill Kovach says he does not know what to believe of what the CIA revealed to his paper about the capabilities of the Glomar Explorer, an alleged deep-sea mining vessel that reportedly was used by the United States in an attempt to recover a sunken Soviet submarine in 1974.

"Counterintelligence has been described as a wilderness of mirrors in which reflections are designed to obfuscate and confuse," said Wise. "There may be circumstances such as this story where it becomes almost impossible to sort out the truth."

To hunt in the wilderness of mirrors, reporters use a variety of techniques for checking or "vetting" a story's veracity.

The best reporters take years to develop a trusted circle of intelligence sources with whom they can check stories. In an atmosphere where no on can talk directly, trust takes the place of full disclosure.

"And the reporter has to keep in mind that even trusted sources have a higher interest, and sometimes they are going to be less than helpful," Wise said.

In the end, journalists actually may surmise, not know, a story is

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accurate when they publish it.

"Abe Rosenthal (executive editor of the New York Times) talks about having a story feel right in your gut," Hersh said. "There is something to that."

'You Can Go Dead Wrong'

Warned one Capitol Hill intelligence expert, again anonymously: "Inherent in the process is the possibility you can go dead wrong. And you won't know until you read the denials in the paper."

Some in the intelligence community find it incredible the press would write stories without being absolutely certain of their accuracy, especially because they think the dangers of publicity are so great.

The very act of publishing, they say, can transport the press from mere observer into active player—if only a partially informed one—in forming intelligence policy.

Many intelligence sources argue, for instance, that last November the Washington Post killed a covert CIA operation designed to undermine and perhaps overthrow Libyan leader Moammar Kadafi. The Post disclosed that the White House had approved the CIA operation and generally outlined how it would work.

What happened, intelligence experts charge, is that someone on Capitol Hill opposed to the plan chose to scuttle the operation unilaterally by leaking word of it.

Consequences Cited

Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward, author of the Libyan story, did not respond to an inquiry about the episode.

Some intelligence officials argue that the press too often fails to consider the consequences of its reporting.

"Some reporters seem to have built themselves into a fairly handy situation of not worrying about consequences, and maybe that is a way to deal with all the uncertainties," said Pherson of the CIA, "but to me that is an excuse not to face the ethical dilemma."

But journalists such as Kovach at the New York Times reply that "other than trying to determine whether you are putting a human life at risk, you really cannot assess consequences."

Indeed, Kovach argues that when you try to pin it down, "There is no evidence that the press has acted irresponsibly, has cost lives or has ever killed a vital operation." What the press has uncovered, Kovach said, are CIA abuses such as drug experimentation on unsuspecting citizens or violations of its charter.

Asked to Hold Story

At times, the CIA, usually through friends on Capitol Hill, will ask a news organization to sit on a story for reasons of national interest, but the CIA says it hesitates to take this course because it effectively confirms the story and often fails to work.

Among such cases, one of the best known is the Glomar Explorer incident, in which the CIA convinced The Los Angeles Times to delay disclosure of the secret U.S. project to recover a sunken Soviet sub.

William F. Thomas, editor and executive vice president of The Times, recalled weighing two issues in the Glomar case: First, was the CIA telling him the truth about what the Glomar was doing and why its operations should remain secret, or was the agency using the newspaper for its own purposes?

Second, "What momentous reason was there to print the story if doing so would put an end to a project that aided the national interest and also would reward the country technologically?" Thomas said.

The Times agreed to hold the story in exchange for details about the project. Then, after columnist Jack Anderson disclosed a portion of the story, The Times as well as the New York Times published their fuller accounts.

Trust Deteriorates

If anything, say many intelligence officers, problems presented by such situations as the Glomar case are worse now, because the level of trust among intelligence officials, Congress and the press has deteriorated and the level of leaking has risen.

"The ship of state used to leak from the scum at the bottom and the political left. Now it leaks from the political right, from the bridge, from the White House and from the (Capitol) Hill," said David Atlee Phillips, an ex-spy and founder of the Assn. of Former Intelligence Officers. "It's like the agency is conducting its operations in Macy's window."

Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.), has introduced a bill to limit access to intelligence secrets on Capitol Hill and inhibit leaking by merging the House and Senate oversight committees.

But the problems are more basic than that. At bottom, the secret community of espionage is an uneasy resident in an open American society, and that is nowhere better illustrated than by the problems of press coverage.

"I cannot recall another story I was positive was as wrong as this defector story," said Holliday of the Senate oversight committee. "But God knows, somebody could come to my office tomorrow with this KGB guy in tow. You just can never be sure."